

Occupational Exposure

He denies it for a very long time.

Each morning he kisses her on the cheek as he leaves for work with the newspaper tucked under his arm, his father's favorite gray fedora sitting jauntily on his head, and closes the front door to the cottage he'd grown up in, closing it on the reality of it as well, he now thinks. Before he walks to work, he stops at Betty Friedhaber's house on the other side of the cemetery and makes sure Betty is able to visit with his mother during the day-- this occurs infrequently, then regularly, and, eventually, Betty arrives at seven-thirty every morning and he kisses both his mother and Betty on the cheek before retrieving the fedora and taking the newspaper. The door is usually open for the morning air as Betty and his mother take coffee on the porch, waving at him from the matching rocking chairs. As he leaves, he knows he will faintly hear them beginning to talk about the various precarious positions of the Wicker children, whose father is the Unitarian minister and *no! She didn't? Well, what do you expect from a Unitarian's daughter?*

This is the sure part of their routine. The part that says that she will wake before him to make his breakfast and coffee, retrieving the newspaper from the steps for him, chat with him about the news in the paper, doing all of this for him as she had for his father for just under fifty years. This is what he knows from the time he graduates mortuary school, barely taking over the business before his father dies and he embalms him on a cold December morning, taking a few days and then returning to finally organize everything. Bills, owed by and to notices, contracts, pre-arranged contracts, order forms for supplies, ordering supplies weekly rather than at need. He can finally do it as he wishes and his chest eases every day he walks into the now organized, pristinely clean office where he's in charge and he can control

everything down to the paperclips.

Louis is able to ignore his mother's sudden disinclination for remembering what precarious positions each of the Wicker children are involved in now. She begins to withdraw from their morning conversations about the news, preferring to stare at the front page with furrowed brows. He finds himself studying the locks one day at the hardware store, wondering if he shouldn't think about how she looks so frail now, her plump frame becoming bonier, as though her mass is simply sliding off her bones and into some black hole. As he stands in the hardware store just before Christmas, looking for a new snow shovel, he thinks about how she cannot climb the attic stairs safely anymore and refuses to without his body to hold onto. Even then, he can bottle his denial up because his mother is fine, forgetting stupid gossip about the Wickers is not a big deal, why should she care about the awful place the world is becoming anyway, her weakness is perfectly normal (she is, after all, getting quite up there).

Once his right foot swings over the threshold of the business, everything is as it should be and that does not change. Not at first. He will make coffee, drink it black, and sit on the front porch on warm mornings, reading the paper, until just before nine, when he begins appointments for the day and when he has them, showings always occur from eleven until one or one-thirty and then four to six (because he must be able to get home to his mother). On days without showings, he is relieved to spend time with the bodies downstairs, stripping off only his suit jacket and staying in his waistcoat, rolling his sleeves to his elbows as he enters and murmurs a "hello" to whoever is in the cooler and embalming room on that day. His mornings are full of quiet observations in the embalming room voice, muted and even more quiet than his indoor voice. *Mr. Taylor, I suppose it makes sense that you didn't spend money on a trip to the dentist, but your wife paid cash for this. I'm glad to see that you didn't go embalming fluid gray overnight, Ms. Howard. If I were to have a son, Mr. Tennenbaum, I should say that he would not be permitted a motorcycle, not after your restoration.* The bodies allow him to talk peaceably. No verbal challenges, like their living relatives or his mother or Aunt Betty.

But this changes. He is confused and frightened by the sudden change, fighting it inside, but not outside, not where his mother might observe. He begins to pop in and out

during the day, going home for a few minutes to “see how things are” and wondering with an aching heart if Ms. Orsino’s fluid is properly distributing and making the soles of her feet the right shade of pink. But more than Ms. Orsino’s skin tone, what bothers him most is the feel of his mother’s bony hand on his arm or her shoulders under his hands when she decides she wants to waltz, as she used to do with his father when he was very young. He is invested in his denial until he feels those hands on his shoulders, until he is forced to leave it, but he can often go back, despite some setbacks to it.

Because one day Betty will call him, her normally strong and sassy tone one of panic, frantically explaining that *I just went to the kitchen to make our coffee and then she’s gone* and Louis abandons his latest reconstruction to find his mother sweeping the porch of the funeral home. When he exits, he finds her there, sweeping some autumn leaves into the dying summer garden.

Oh, Louie, I’m just cleaning, sweetheart.

Mother, you haven’t helped out around here in a few years.

Oh, really?

Yes, really.

He works out a new system with Betty. He does the books at home, coming home for lunch and doing them afterwards, until it is time to begin preparing for a funeral. His new system makes him miss the short walks to Joe’s Diner, just three blocks north and a block west of the funeral home, but since his mother is delighted to prepare lunch for him, he supposes that it’s worth it. When he finds her in the kitchen one morning, gazing curiously at a picture of Seymour while cooking his eggs, she looks up at him, a crease crossing her brows as she looks down at the eggs, to him, and back to the photo.

“That’s your favorite photo of Seymour,” he says, as casually as he can, sitting down and reaching for the paper. It is not there. She notices immediately and piles his eggs on the plate.

“Yes,” she says, “of course it is. I’ll get your paper, Louie-” she tries to touch his elbow, as though it’s a gesture of apology, but he can only pull it away, almost imperceptibly,

as though it's merely coincidental. He sets it firmly on the table so she cannot try again.

"I can-"

"No, no," she says, "I can do it."

She forgets to turn the gas off on the stove. Louis watches her walk away, fork clenched in his hand, and when he hears the opening of the front door, he leans over and shuts the burner off.

There are many moments where he reminds her what her favorite photos are and they become moments where he must prompt her to remember who is *in* those photographs and the metamorphosis crystallizes in his heart the morning that he finds her sitting in the living room, the kitchen dark and cold, while she thumbs through a cracked, leather photo album she had retrieved from underneath the TV stand.

She turns at the creaking noise made by the old hardwood floor and he is struck by how the sunlight is cast over her face from the opening of the blue curtains that are hung by the front windows, illuminating the lines of her face and the white strands in her hair. Her eyes light up when she sees him and she waves him over. He kneels by the sofa, his fingers just a few inches from where her hand rests on the arm.

His mother points to a photo of his father, a Marine uniform fitting him as perfectly for Korea as Seymour's had for Vietnam. She is beside his father, smiling broadly, holding Seymour, who is about one in the photo. They don't know how much is waiting for them in this photo and Louis stares, ignoring his mother for a few moments as he thinks about how in twenty years, their boy will not be helping in the funeral home. He will be an inhabitant of it, in a casket that is side-by-side with Theodore Friedhaber, immortalized only in the stories told to his younger brother. After a few minutes, his mother impatiently shakes his shoulder.

"Who is that young man?" she asks.

The photo is black and white. The young man is the man she had married the day before he shipped off to fight against the commies, having his son nine months to the day of his departure and no one can doubt the paternity of Seymour Carbine when they see the profile of his sharp nose. And nearly fifty years later she had buried that young man, gone

from strong to impotent, optimist to cynic, fighter to lover, and what else had his father been that Louis could never know since he was dead?

“That’s Dad,” Louis says, standing up from where he knelt. He looks at her over his shoulder and goes into the kitchen to begin making breakfast. The eggs are burnt and the toast is not particularly palatable. She eats all of her food and smiles at him as she pushes her plate away, folding her hands primly in front of her. He pushes his partially finished plate across the table.

“I’ll have to teach you to cook,” she says very quietly. Louis does not know why it feels like there is something creeping down his throat. In freshman biology he had learned how the esophagus pushed things down, contracting, wasn’t it--

“Mother,” he says and there is a tone to his voice he does not like. It does not suit Louis Carbine, funeral director and mortician. It’s more apropos of Louie Carbine, young ruffian and Tabitha-Turner’s-flower-smasher-I’m-sorry-about-that-ma’am.

“We’ll start tomorrow morning,” she says, standing up. She is not frail as she points at him. “I expect you to put no less effort in this than you do those poor folks.”

She pats his shoulder as she picks up their dishes. There is a moment she leaves it there a few seconds longer. He wants to take it for a moment and squeeze, to reassure her somehow, reassure himself, but he stands and takes his father’s fedora from its spot by the backdoor, placing it on his head at a jaunty angle. He kisses her on the cheek after he responds to her declaration:

“Of course, Mother.”

He can make passable eggs, tolerable toast, and finds a niche in homemade mashed potatoes, which quickly become a staple as she begins to neglect cooking over the next few years. The days start to meld together and Louis’s cooking repertoire increases to pork chops, gravy, various casseroles, and various types of chicken. Every Sunday they sit down after church and plan out the new meals and the old (she insists he’ll forget how to make them otherwise). She writes the ingredients down slowly, pausing for periods as she tries to remember names, looking at him sometimes to be prompted, which has become a game for

them. He begins by asking whether or not it's a meat, vegetable, fruit, herb/spice, or other. Then he will narrow it down further and further until she either remembers or he hits the right one. This game is only to be played when it is the two of them in the kitchen, alone.

One Sunday they are compiling a new list when she pauses and sets the pen down, looking at him seriously.

"Louie," she says, "I think I should teach you how to make cherry cobbler and beef and noodles. Those are your favorites, aren't they?"

"Yes, Mother," he says.

"My mother taught them to me," she says, "and her mother before her. I think it needs to be written down. Seeing as how I have my two boys, someone needs to know."

"You won't even tell *Betty*," he says, but there is a smile playing his lips. She smiles primly at him as she lifts the pen again.

"Yes, well, they'll go excellently with your potatoes."

She scratches out the old list, beginning a new one. Louis watches her, his eyes beginning to see the squiggles and defects in her rendition of the words 'beef' and 'flour.' Her handwriting had been calligraphy for as long as he could remember, practiced on letters to her beloved father in Western Europe, to her husband in Korea, son in Vietnam, and she had shouldered those burdens with a straight chin and a head held high, but when she had written the letter to his high school principal about his heart defect and subsequent absences from gym class, her handwriting had suffered.

This is what her writing now reminds him of as she reverts to printing over her beautiful cursive. This is what he thinks her pain looks like, butchered calligraphy. But pain has nerves and chemicals, synapses and hormones and neurotransmitters--

There is a brief moment where he touches her shoulder with his hand, which makes her pause, but he takes it away quickly, busying himself instead with the account book. In his mind, he sees the word 'beef' and how it is chopped into four definite letters, no longer a smooth continuation of a single one. And within a few weeks, he will begin to write the grocery lists out, acutely aware of the box of recipes behind his back, written by her over some years, that sits on the kitchen counter.

The drive back from a nursing home in another town takes a half-hour because of heavier traffic and by the time he swings the hearse into the driveway, Louis realizes that he hasn't had lunch yet. After pulling into the garage, Louis begins pulling out the stretcher, relieved that the legs automatically come down and snap audibly into place. He pushes it towards the elevator, thinking about his father's foresight to have it installed before it would have cost him half of his business.

He walks home after putting the elderly stroke patient, Robert Ulysses Johnson, in the cooler and mixing the appropriate chemicals. When he gets there, his mother and Betty are sitting at the kitchen table, listening to the radio. Although he only meant to check on her, she forces a container of leftovers into his hands.

"You won't eat otherwise," she says firmly. And then there is a moment of anxiousness. She twists the bottom of her shirt in her fingers. "You will eat, won't you, Louie?"

"Of course," he says, leaning over and kissing her on the cheek and checking his watch. "I do have to go embalm this man though. His daughter promised to meet me two minutes ago."

Gabrielle Johnson is a slim woman with graying brown hair, attired in an elegant business suit. She is sitting in some of the patio furniture on the front porch as Louis walks up.

"Are you ready?" he asks, looking at her.

"Yes," she says, hardly moving her lips. "I won't be in your way, but I have to-"

"I understand," he says. And he does. He had not allowed another mortician to embalm his father, but as a businesswoman, she can only do the next best thing and observe carefully. He sets the leftovers on the fireplace mantel before retrieving his pre-arranged contract with Robert Ulysses Johnson.

Walking downstairs, she follows closely behind him. He turns the knob to the old door with the peeling letters that say "Private" and the bright red sign warning about the carcinogenic nature of formaldehyde. He takes his jacket off and hangs it on a hook by the

desk where his camera and forms are. He begins his preparation work as usual, asking her to stay by the desk as he goes into the cooler and rolls Robert Ulysses Johnson to the embalming table. With a practiced movement, he pulls the man's legs and lower body onto the table and then moves quickly, pulling his torso onto it. He steps back respectfully and allows Gabrielle to observe her father.

Her only movement is to stroke his forehead for a few moments, then she flattens the thin hair on his crown, which springs back up sluggishly. Then she steps back and gestures for Louis to continue. She takes the seat behind the desk, watching as he notes the body's physical condition, photographing unusual marks, and then rolls up his sleeves and dons protective gear, washing her father carefully, scrubbing cradle cap from his scalp and applying disinfectant to as much skin as he can, letting it dry before beginning to shave his face.

As he pulls the sagging cheek upwards and shaves it with a quick movement, he hears Gabrielle Johnson behind him, murmuring.

"Pardon?" he asks, checking the face for peach fuzz that will interfere with make-up.

"He never shaved himself like that," she says, looking at the disposable razor in his hand. "Always with a straight razor-"

"I can do that, if you prefer," Louis says, but she shrugs. He feels uneasy at her intrusion and he wants to tell Robert Ulysses Johnson that his daughter really ought to go upstairs and mind her own business. *Mr. Johnson, can't you control her?* He smiles broadly at this thought and then bows his head, busying himself with the razor. As he presses it to the cheek, he feels her hand on his forearm and he jerks back, feeling his heart racing wildly as he takes a step backwards.

"*What?*" he asks, hissing it by drawing out the 'a' and 't' sounds. Gabrielle takes a step back from him.

"If I brought you a straight razor-" she starts to say and Louis's heart steadies as he realizes she is requesting something. He can affirm or deny, he can do or not do it, it's his choice here- "would you shave him like that?"

It doesn't matter, he's screaming to himself. *Please tell her for the love of God that it does not*

matter, *Mr. Johnson! It will just take me longer-*

“Please,” she says and she tries to touch his wrist, but Louis deftly steps back to place the razor on his counter, his back to her. He cannot remember the last time someone had requested or asked with a ‘please,’ which was the trouble with a body. They let you know their requests with skin coloration, tricky rigor mortis, obvious trauma, how much fluid they needed by body weight, whether or not they accepted death by their facial features or if their eyes just dropped back into the head with no explanation.

Please.

Louis tosses the razor away.

“I have a straight razor,” he says, “upstairs. It was my father’s. I was never sure why it was here-”

Her hand is on his shoulder and he tenses, resisting with every nerve in his body to *not pull away* even as they too screamed *touching. Someone is touching you and you didn’t say so and it’s not your mother-*

He lets her keep her hand there for a few more minutes, his nerves quickly ignoring it as he thinks vaguely about the faint pressure of it.

“I’ll be right back,” he says, going upstairs and looking in his top desk drawer, quickly finding the razor. He checks it as he would one of his scalpels, observing the edge for nicks and imperfections that will cause damage. It’s sharp and he sees a brand name on the handle. *Invisible Edge.*

Downstairs, he carefully applies a little more shaving cream to Mr. Johnson’s face before beginning a careful scraping. He finds that it works well, much better than the cheap disposable razors. Rinsing off the blade, he turns to her where she’s perched on his desk. He wants to say something inane and almost blurts out *nice weather* before he realizes she doesn’t give two damns about the weather. Instead he sets the razor to dry by the sink.

Then the limbs are massaged until they are limber again. By the time this is finished, he turns to her.

“I have to set his facial features,” he says. “I’ll have to thread a line through his maxilla and mandible. It can be a bit disconcerting-”

“I’m not worried about it,” she says, crossing her legs.

“Alright,” he says and begins by placing the eye caps after spreading moisturizer over them and making the lids meet. She watches intently as he threads the mouth closed, tying the knot outside the right nostril before tucking it inside.

When he pulls out a scalpel, he sees her tense out of the corner of his eye. He looks over the bedraggled form of Robert Ulysses Johnson, his thin, pale limbs carefully splayed on the table, his sparse, wiry chest hair a pure white, loose skin and wrinkles everywhere, his penis sadly hanging down amidst a patch of white hair, and he feels a deep pity for the first time in years. He has not felt like this for a long time, not since his second or third solo embalming. He has the ability to remain cool and cold, objective. It had been a point of pride. No injuries shake him, but this poor old man, one of hundreds or thousands he’s embalmed, has him in a vice of pity he cannot seem to escape. This vulnerability is usually reserved for the mortician and only the mortician.

But she should not see this. Not for her sake, but for Robert Ulysses Johnson’s sake. She should not watch him in this final, inevitable stage.

Except that he cannot stop her. And he had done worse for his father and will do worse for his mother.

He raises the scalpel to inspect it for nicks. It’s perfect. He brings it down and presses, but before he can separate the skin, her hand is on his wrist and he panics, stepping back and dropping the scalpel on the ground, afraid that he has cut her as she cries out. But he makes it out amidst the roaring in his ears as he realizes that she’s touching him again and he does not, cannot like it, but *he does and what’s wrong, what is wrong with me and you know what’s wrong, Louis, because you spend 130 hours a week with your elderly mother and when was the last time a real person touched you-*

“What is *wrong* with you?”

“Pardon?” he asks.

She looks down at her father, the harsh lines near her eyes softening. She strokes his forehead again and pets his hair.

“This whole thing,” she says. “It’s so sterile. So controlled and you’re just so content,

sitting here and cutting him up and sewing his mouth like that-- this is *my father*."

"I embalmed my father," Louis says, nonplussed. "It was fairly simple. Heart attack. The hardest thing was that he leaked a lot, so I had to stuff cotton up his-- well, I got it to stop in the end."

She looks at him, mouth slightly open and it occurs to Louis that this was not information that was usually shared. He'd told several bodies about it and they seemed to appreciate his warning. Not one of them leaked, even Mrs. Cole and he'd been sure about her after pick-up.

"I- I need to go back to his house," Gabrielle says. "I've probably spent too long here anyway--"

"I have to finish," Louis says quickly, relieved that she has decided to let her father be. But he must finish soon, for supper. He must check on his mother.

"I know you do," she says, looking up and away, turning her back on her father. "I know you should finish. I've just- I haven't left him in ten years. But I can't see him like this."

"Not himself," Louis says without thinking. She smiles wryly.

"He hasn't been himself in years," she informs him. "He had dementia. He couldn't remember little things years ago and then he moved in with my husband and I, but I could go to my career. I could leave him alone. And then I could leave him with a nurse. But then I couldn't leave him and all I could do was cook and bathe him and help him with his medicines. And he was mostly my father, but he still wasn't--" she trails off, looking at Louis, who is staring intently at the scalpel clutched in his hand.

"I can't see him about to be pumped up full of chemicals-- for what? So a bunch of people who never did anything to help can pretend to be sad that he's gone?"

I could leave him alone. But then I couldn't leave him. And he was mostly my father, but--

"God help me," Gabrielle says quietly after silence, "I was glad when they called me and told me he had a stroke and died in his sleep. He didn't suffer. I was afraid of that. Losing him... well, I lost him years ago anyway."

She looks back down at her father and leans over, kisses his cheek.

“You’re a good listener,” she says, touching Louis’s wrist. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s what I’m here for,” Louis says, setting the scalpel on the table. He walks with her up the stairs and to the door, standing just inside as she crosses over the threshold, much like he does every morning. She turns to him and as she does, he is struck by her earlier confession.

I couldn’t leave him alone... but then I couldn’t. Gabrielle looks as though she’s going to say goodbye and he can’t let her leave. Not when he doesn’t mind her touching him and she says ‘please’ and he can’t remember the last time either of those things happened.

“My mother has dementia,” he says desperately, suddenly unsure if he’s trying to keep her here or keep himself here in this very moment, this moment where he finally had a tenuous connection to someone for the first time in years. Someone *alive* and *coherent*.

“It doesn’t get easier,” Gabrielle says, stepping back and looking as though she’s sizing him up. “It just gets harder and harder until one day you just give-up. Oh, they’ll tell you this and that, but, really, you’ll just give up-” she becomes quieter- “and you’ll feel awful about it. Get used to feeling even more awful than you already do, Mr. Car-”

“Louis,” he says. The smile on her face is knowing as she looks at him.

“-Louis,” she says, drawing out the ‘s’ slightly. “Come out here so I can look at you properly-”

His foot automatically goes over the threshold, but he stops and pulls himself back. The porch is covered in sunshine and he looks over it, down the street towards where his mother is safely ensconced in their home with Betty. He wants to put a foot over, but he sees it clearly now, remembering *I couldn’t leave him alone* and *butchered calligraphy*. Those are what is in front of him now, ensconced in the cottage. The moment he steps through to Gabrielle, she will trespass into what is behind him, the bodies and his carefully organized systems. *His control*. He does not know why this strikes him so strongly at that moment, but he knows it to be true.

“I need to finish embalming your father,” he says. “Otherwise he won’t turn out properly-”

“I understand,” she says, looking at him as he stands, shadowed in the doorway. Only

the dark hallway is behind him. He looks down, unable to look her in the face.

“I’ll come for the official stuff tomorrow-” and, suddenly, like that, she is gone after pressing her lips just over his eyebrow and he hadn’t even minded because somewhere he had decided it was OK, as long as it was Gabrielle Johnson and as long as she was quick about it.

Louis is left alone again, pressing the scalpel and separating and he raises the artery, makes sure there is a good seal as he slides the tubing in, but he doesn’t flip on the machine yet. He returns upstairs and begins to eat his leftovers, wandering around the building, thinking of Gabrielle Johnson.

I could leave him. Louis remembers leaving the cottage every morning, kissing his mother on the cheek, sure that she would have lunch ready when he returned. Sure that everything would be exactly as it was when he returned.

But then I couldn’t leave him. And then Betty began to show every morning at 7:30 sharp.

And he was mostly my father, but he still wasn’t- Louis knows what she wanted to say here. *She still wasn’t the mother I knew.* She was not the cook, the calligrapher, the letter writer, gardener. Somehow he had assumed these roles now.

Louis looks to the fireplace mantel. Photographs of Carbine men and their families are carefully spread across it. He dusts it weekly, sometimes twice. The photo of his brother is in the middle, his father on one side.

A bunch of people who never did anything.

He strides over to the fireplace, observing his ancestors disinterestedly. Undertakers and coffinmakers of Victorian England. New morticians in New England and then his grandfather standing in front of this very building, freshly purchased. Then his father, very young and just graduated from mortuary school, standing with his grandfather. There is a photo of himself, standing alone on the porch. Seymour’s Army photo is in the place of honor, forever usurping Louis’s position.

What bothers Louis the most is that, sometimes, he envies his dead brother and he is afraid of what he envies. Does he envy the ability to say no to their father and the family business? Or does he envy the courage it took him to put the end of an M16 in his mouth

while Elvis sang about blue suede shoes? But they came down to the same thing, didn't they? Seymour had a choice and had made it for himself.

Without a thought, he takes the photograph of his dead brother and hurls it across the room, enjoying the shattering sound of the glass. He wants to throw another, but he can't, but that's OK because he takes his photo and puts it in the place where it should be on the mantel.

I could leave him alone. And then I couldn't.

Butchered calligraphy.

He was mostly my father, but he still wasn't.

He wipes his nose on his sleeve, not thinking about dry cleaning or that he's crying, only thinking about how satisfying it feels to hear the crunch of the glass, but it's a hollow satisfaction because it's there for a moment and now he has to clean up. Louis lowers himself to the hearth and buries his face in his hands, forcing himself to stop crying because *it doesn't do a goddamn thing*. He feels snot smeared on his hand and keeps his face resting on his closed fists, pressing them into his eyes.

He had never had a choice. He could not do this by himself, but he did not have a choice. How many nights can he take of cooking and Elvis vinyls and movies with his mother? He does not know, but he does know that the answer doesn't matter.

After a few minutes of controlled breathing, he looks up. Gabrielle Johnson will be in first thing in the morning, he is sure. Her father's first showing is at eleven and family will begin to arrive at ten-thirty. So Louis gathers himself, picking up whatever had escaped his iron self-discipline in his strange encounter as he picks up the shattered remains of his brother's picture frame. When he goes back downstairs to finish Robert Ulysses Johnson's embalming, he methodically performs every step, making him look fit and beautifully like the photo Gabrielle had given him.

But he does not say a word to Robert Ulysses Johnson nor does he think about what he would like to say. Louis gradually stops speaking to the bodies that he embalms and prepares, playing Elvis and Chuck Berry albums in the new silence.

Betty becomes a regular when his mother turns seventy-five. After a few weeks of her nearly full-time attention and care, Louis visits her after his mother has gone to bed. When he tries to shove a handful of bills in her hand, she recoils and throws them at him. There are twenties and some fives that land on her porch. *I don't need that*, she says. He believes her. He does not try to pay her again. He hunches over, head bowed, and says *thank you* with more gratitude than he has ever felt in his life. Then he retreats home, visions of his mother waking in fear and confusion in his mind (*and oh my God what if she decides to get out of bed and ends up wandering off*, even though she has not done anything like this except the one time) and making him move more quickly than he ever has in his life.

By the time he's halfway home, he's running and when he closes the front door behind himself, he feels weak, shaky, near fainting. He remembers his heart defect. He takes his palm and slides it under his shirt, feeling his heartbeat until it returns to normal. His mother is sleeping comfortably in her bed and he is acutely aware of how she is curled up, one arm held tightly next to herself and one thrown across the bed. This is how he sleeps. He pulls the comforter up to her chin as she shivers and goes downstairs to listen to Elvis vinyls.

He is in his thirties. This is what he does every Thursday evening.

The nine-year-old girl needs half of her skull reconstructed. He is not sure if he can do it, but he is debating the pros and cons of using some chicken wire, shaping it to the best approximation of her crushed skull. He can use what's left for that. Although he has long learned that no person has a symmetrical body, for most people, there is a superficial, visual symmetry. His gloves are off as he looks down at her, arms crossed over his chest. Underneath his apron he is wearing a dark suit, expecting another client early this afternoon. It's a busy day at Carbine's.

The reconstruction is finished by noon. Louis walks home for lunch, intending to trade Betty off for the afternoon after his appointment at one. The day is a brisk one in autumn and he's feeling pleased with himself for his clever reconstruction and thinking that his mother has had many good days lately. They haven't played their guessing game, which

has long become routine and escaped the kitchen, and when they page through the albums together, she remembers who most people are. She has called him by his father's name once or twice, but after he paused, she seemed to remember that he was her son, not her husband. He did not respond, so he hopes, at any rate, that she *had* remembered.

Betty stays for lunch and, since her good days are numerous lately, stays for a chat on the porch. Louis washes the dishes with his suit jacket hanging on the kitchen chair behind himself, white shirt sleeves rolled past his elbows, and the window above the sink open. He hears his mother and Betty talking quietly about Seymour and Theodore, their words coming through the screen just as easily as the wind of the day. Once he finishes, he returns to work to deal with his one o' clock client.

Once he checks everything, he locks up for a few hours (the girl's showings will begin late tomorrow morning). He walks home, enjoying the sun on his face for once, and spends the rest of the afternoon playing cards with his mother. Every so often, he will have to prompt her and she asks him blandly which cards she should play, but she calls him Louis. He's in the middle of making supper when his cell phone rings. He answers it while his mother fiddles with the record player in the other room. Out of the corner of his eye he sees her pick up an Elvis record (they had all belonged to Seymour) and put it on the turntable. The phone is put to his ear.

"Hello," he says. "Louis Carbine."

"Mr. Carbine? This is Peter Reed-" Louis must force himself to remember and it's the uncle of the girl whose skull he had reconstructed- "I need to see you-"

"Mr. Reed," Louis says, "I don't know if-"

"Please. I need to see-- I need to know what she looks like. I need to see if she looks right. My sister is going to look whether or not-"

"I took care of it," Louis says quietly, trying not to disturb his mother, who is enjoying "Burning Love" at a low level and hears a snatch of lyrics, *But I feel fine*.

"I need to see for myself. I'm here right now-"

Louis looks at his mother, who is waiting expectantly. This is their routine. This is how she feels safe. Supper, music, a bath, a mindless movie, a short story, and bed.

“Please.”

Louis looks at his watch. He sees the recipe box with his mother’s calligraphy in it, progressing from smooth to flawed and painful.

This is my mother’s pain, butchered calligraphy.

His father’s finest effort had been the reconstruction of Seymour’s skull and face. Seymour’s funeral had been open-casket. Louis had copies of the letters from Seymour to his mother and her responses to him. The originals were dropped into his casket. *Butchered calligraphy.*

“Give me ten minutes.”

“I’ll be waiting--” the phone is silence and Louis mutters a few choice words under his breath.

“What was that, Louie?”

“Nothing, Mother. I need-- I have to go to work for awhile--”

“Go on,” she says.

Louis pauses. “I’ll be gone a half-hour. I just need to meet--”

“Go,” she says. He shuts off the stove burners and looks outside, running his hand through his hair as he sees that it’s starting to get dark. He frowns, but she gently shoves his shoulder.

“I’ll be fine,” she says firmly. “The business needs you.”

With that he grabs his father’s fedora and dashes out of the door, making it to the building in five minutes. Peter Reed is at the front door, leaning against it. He straightens as he sees Louis, who ushers him into the building and takes him downstairs. Peter pauses at the door to the embalming room.

“Do we-- do we need to go in here?”

“She’s in there,” Louis says quietly. “I’ll dress her tomorrow morning and take care of those other things then as well, but she’s presentable.”

Louis pushes the door open and lets Peter Reed look. Peter comes back a moment later, hands shoved in his pockets and head down.

“Is she gonna be-- open casket?”

“Yes. I have a headband that will nicely cover up the sutures.”

Peter looks up at him, mouth slightly open.

“It’s so casual to you,” he says. “And I know it’s gotta be. But that’s the only niece I’ll ever have in there.”

Louis knows his cold attitude offends some, but he smiles stiffly. He cannot help it. They cannot help it. What does it matter in the long run?

“I took care of my father,” he says, though it’s what he doesn’t say that’s worse. *When I get home, I will make supper for my mother and very, very gently coax her to eat. She does not need much persuasion, but still. Then we will listen to Elvis Presley from my dead brother’s vinyl collection. She will take a bath and I must help her undress and get in, sitting nearby with a book until she calls for me when she is done. And after that, what should bother me?*

Peter looks down again and shrugs. “Sorry. I mean-- you just seem so cool and cold about everything. I reckon you can’t feel something for everyone who comes through here.”

“Do you feel better now?” Louis asks, as gently as he can, placing a hand on the other man’s shoulder. *Cool and cold.* Does that mean his heart is ice cold, frozen solid, immovable and impermeable? Peter doesn’t speak for a few minutes.

“Yeah.”

When he exits and locks the door again, night is sneaking up on him, sliding into the empty space between the trashcan and garage, the crooked cobblestones that lead from the front door of the funeral home to the garage, and he begins a walk home, for what he hopes is a final time that day. The night elongates his shadow under the weakly sputtering streetlights and he turns down the driveway of the cemetery, ending up home quickly. He looks up and furrows his brows as he sees all the lights in the cottage on.

Louis approaches the door slowly, taking the front doorknob and opening the door quietly, feeling his guts knot and unravel all in one as he steps into the small entryway. In the other room, the Elvis vinyl is still playing; now it’s “Jailhouse Rock.” Everything looks fine. He begins to slowly relax. He was only gone for fifteen minutes and most of that was travel time.

“Mother?” he calls. He calls again, louder, as he walks to the kitchen. Everything he’d

had out on the stove was still sitting there, undisturbed. His stomach has settled, but he feels the back of his neck prickle as he turns towards the stairs. The walk up them is slow and he pauses near the top.

“Mother?”

“Matthew?”

Louis stays where he stands for a few minutes. That is his father’s name. He takes a few steps and looks out of the only window in the hallway, books haphazardly piled under it. The night has taken over the sky where he sees it. To his left is his mother’s bedroom (the master) and to his right is his own. His hand lands on the left doorknob and he enters, seeing her sitting on her bed. The overhead light is on and so are both of the table lamps on the nightstands.

“Matthew?”

“It’s me, Mother, not Father-”

“Seymour?”

Louis stares at her for a moment. No one could confuse his scrawny, slight frame for Seymour’s tall, strong build.

“It’s Louie.”

She looks at him, hard. “Of course.”

“Why are all the lights on?” He tries to say it as gently as he can, but she flinches and looks down at her hands, which are splayed on her knees. As he looks at her trying to formulate an answer, he wishes he had not asked. He should have just let it be, let it go, ignored all of the lights until she was back in her right mind--

But she won’t be.

He freezes as he looks at her. *She won’t be.* This admission, whatever it will be, is costing her more than anything else he’s ever asked, maybe even more than the day he had asked what Vietnam was and she had tried to explain the war to him at age eight, but she hadn’t even understood and she’d just locked herself in her room and cried for days. Because she hadn’t been able to understand what it was either and what did that mean for Seymour? But this is worse. This is an admission she must make.

“Were gone,” she murmurs, “and I thought about- making supper. You work so much. But I couldn’t-- the stove. I couldn’t remember--” she pauses and finally looks up at him, gesturing, but he didn’t know what it meant and she would get it out soon- “I got angry. And I realized how dark- Louie- I think- I think I’m afraid, like when you were little.”

He wants to say *oh Mother* and he wants to wrap his arms around her because she looks so frail, like if he looked at her harshly she could fall over and shatter. But he can’t and he never could, so there was no point in it. He stands there awkwardly and lays a hand on her shoulder. She takes it and holds it tightly for a few minutes. It’s such a far cry from his childhood fears, when she had camped out on his bedroom floor with him, a camp light between them and they had slept there together, her confidence so reassuring to him, but he was not confident. There weren’t any camp lights in the cottage.

“We’ll go to the hardware store tomorrow morning,” he says. “And get whatever you need.”

“OK,” she says quietly.

“Want to listen to Elvis?”

She nods.

“Still want all the lights on?”

She shakes her head. He turns off the overhead and one of the table lamps. She stands up and clutches his arm. Her hand is shaking and seems to calm down as she leans on him. He wants to shout that it’s not how it’s supposed to be, he’s not supposed to be stuck doing this, he had already been stuck with the business, but there was no one else--

Her fear seems to subside as they listen to Elvis together, side by side on the sofa. After an hour, he scrounges up something to eat. She goes to bed at nine, as always, and he returns downstairs to sit at the kitchen table with only the table lamp on, pretending to do the books, but he brings out the recipe cards, beginning with her scrambled eggs. Of course she had felt the need to write those down. She had never really trusted him with anything before she had been forced to. He looks at the smooth lettering and imagines her working almost effortlessly for this. He puts scrambled eggs back and pulls out the last two. His mother’s recipes for beef and noodles and cherry cobbler. Ah, if Betty knew these were so

close every day she was here-- his fingers trace the letters, jagged and imperfect. Printed and as jointed together as she could manage. He momentarily thinks he could just copy the recipes again, but he looks at them and puts them back. He can read them still.

In his bed, he tosses and turns for a few minutes, then he thinks of what Peter Reed had said about him, "cool and cold about everything." No, not about everything. All it took was the broken word in a line of cursive and it could slide through the cracks in his ice cold, heart and shatter it. This he knows now.

This is my mother's pain, he recites to himself, turning in bed again and then back, *butchered calligraphy.*

He rolls back over to his side, curling up with one arm next to his body and the other thrown across the bed.

When he goes to the hardware store, he buys nightlights and places them in the hallway, bathroom, and her bedroom. She says nothing after Louis has done this, but he sees it turned on very faintly under her door each night. He takes to pacing the hallways and downstairs until he is sure that she is asleep, checking on her by putting his ear to the door. When he no longer hears the dull murmur of a radio, he goes to bed.

In a book that he checks out of the library, he finds the term he is looking for. Sundowning. Associated with the mid-stages of dementia. Confusion, fear, agitation, and restlessness during the evening hours and dusk. Increased by changing routines. During the evenings, he begins to shut his cell phone off until her moods dissipate, which they generally do a little while after supper. He reads the books at night, stuffing them under his mattress when he does not have the comfort of knowing she's in bed to read them. Fear of the dark is apparently common.

He adheres to the schedule and routine more tightly than he had ever done before. It comforts her. He knows this with a strange, new intuition. But whatever this intuition is, it doesn't change the fact that he removes the knives from the kitchen drawers or put the appliances in a locked cupboard when he stops feeling comfortable around her. The key is on him at all times. It does not bring back her calligraphy or cooking, which he can never

quite manage to replicate, even on good days when she hovers around him, offering suggestions.

And he begins to feel something pressing down on him, beginning with his shoulders when he thinks about going home from work, and he feels like he's carrying around the twenty-pound bags of mulch that he uses to landscape the yard of the business. It starts with his shoulders and as the months pass by, it moves by millimeters down his arms and onto his chest. It moves down as the seasons change, going from millimeters to centimeters and the twenty-pound bags become forty and fifty and after a few years like this, he wonders what it would be like to go to bed and not feel pressed down, to not feel like his mother is costing him his vitality.

Twenty years after he's graduated high school and eighteen after he first noticed that she wasn't quite the mother he remembered from his childhood, she passes into territory that he had never imagined, had never *wanted* to imagine.

"Matthew," she says to him and Louis ignores it as he looks at her over the newspaper. "Matthew-"

"Hm?"

"Matthew, my shoes-"

Louis folds up his newspaper and sets it down on the counter. "I don't know where they'd be-"

"I told you not to put them under the bed," she says. He says nothing to this, observing her. After a few minutes, she looks back at him with furrowed brows.

"You're not Matthew," she says. He presses his knuckles into the table.

"I'm not," he says. He is sure she will remember soon. She always has, even after calling him by his father's name or Seymour's. She always has.

"I know you," she says, "I know-- I feel safe, but-" she stares at him again.

He looks at her. This weight on his shoulders is almost unbearable. All he wants to do it slide down to the floor, to lose himself under the table-

"I'm Louis," he says, knowing there's a tremor in his voice.

“Lou-is,” she says slowly, still looking at him. There’s a lilt in her voice. Worse, there’s still a question.

“I’m your son.”

“Seymour?”

“Louis.”

“Seymour,” she says. “My son. His name-”

He looks at her sitting there and he feels for the first time some rage, some kind of *hatred* because who cares if she’s not in her right mind? Seymour’s dead. He’s dead and dead and so is his father and they’ve both been dead for so long and who’s the one who wakes her gently in the mornings, helps her dress, cooks and feeds her breakfast, makes sure that her caretakers are the best, still supplemented by the aging, just as sharp as ever Aunt Betty, and lunch at Joe’s diner and missed dates and the quickie with wonderful woman he had met at the coffee shop in the embalming room had never gone further *because he couldn’t leave her and he was the only one* and he wants to strike out at her--

“Louie,” she says. She looks at him, places a hand on his arm. “What-”

He looks up at her and he feels like when he’d been a little boy and she had caught him sneaking candy or cookies, but he wishes it were just candy or cookies. This is unassailable, this is his inner life.

“Nothing, Mother,” he says quietly, putting his hand over hers. “Would you like to listen to some Elvis?”

“Oh yes,” she says. “I’ll do it-”

She shuffles into the front room, grasping for support along the counter and along the back of the sofa. He stands up and watches her leave and wonders as he reaches from the recipe box. He pulls out one at random and sees it’s for beef and noodles. He hears her fiddling with the record player as the pads of his fingers trace the letters.

This is my mother’s pain, butchered calligraphy, he thinks for the first time in a few years, wishing that some errors when writing were all she had. He sets the recipe card off to the side. He pulls the kitchen phone receiver off of the hook. Elvis begins to play. He holds the receiver in one hand as he pulls the phone book towards himself and opens it. He skims the

yellow pages, looks at all the options.

Butchered calligraphy, he thinks as he dials, and he still thinks it as he speaks to a receptionist quietly. He writes down the appointment time on the back of the recipe card he had laid down and when he hangs up, he puts it in his left, breast blazer pocket.

“Are you-” she pauses as she searches for a word- “busy?”

“No, Mother.”

“Dance?” she asks. “I used to with-- Matthew.”

He looks at her and turns with a smile. He offers her his arm.

“I would love to.”

She puts her arms around his neck and he thinks of when she used to dance with his father. One of his hands is on her shoulder and the other on her back. Her forehead presses against his chest.

It occurred to him to question when had his happiness mattered in the past decade. When had he decided that this was better than his own life, a wife, children, a life not consumed by the business or her needs or what someone else needed--

“Oh, Matthew,” she murmurs. “We’ll always be happy. Won’t we?”

Louis lets her press her cheek to his jacket. Her cheek is against the recipe card with the appointment time on the other side. He hears Elvis outside of himself as he feels his eyes burn and he resists wiping them, carefully controlling his breathing.

This is my mother’s pain, butchered calligraphy.

“Of course we will.”

The books are in perfect order the moment he shuts them, satisfied with the day’s accounting, and just as Louis thinks he will go home, his cell phone begins to ring. He picks it up, looking at the number and recognizing a hospice nurse’s name. It’s undoubtedly a pick-up and when he answers, he hears her talking about a deceased single man in his early forties (cancer). Died at home. No family except a single cousin and an elderly aunt. So he calls Betty to let her know and takes off, driving down the road with the windows of the hearse down. The address is a non-descript ranch in the suburbs. It seems like a bit of a

drive when he passes three funeral homes on the way there and he pulls into the driveway, noticing one across the street. But it's a corporate hellhole and he walks up and knocks on the door with his eyes on it.

"Hello, Louis," a woman says and it's the way she holds onto the 's' in his name that he knows. He says nothing and looks at Gabrielle Johnson out of the corner of his eye now, eyeing her with a little of the same emotion as the hellhole across the street. He can't remember how long it's been since her father's funeral. Years, he knows. Maybe a decade. It's all blurred together though and all he can think about is how she's the last person who was able to touch him without his explicit permission. He cannot even touch his mother.

But her hand is on his elbow, guiding him in and he lets her.

"My cousin," she says, "Jeffrey O'Brien. He had cancer-" she stops him in front of a gurney and looks down. Louis sees a man not much older than himself. Same slight build, a little shorter than average. Short brown hair.

"My mother's sister's son," she says, laughing lowly. "He was really the only person I had left, except his mother. I don't envy the nurse who tells her that he passed. Though she may not even understand-" she trails off and eyes him.

"How have you been?" she asks politely.

"Well," he says. "The same."

The same. Yes.

"And-- your mother?"

"I'm looking into options," he says, which is partially true.

"I still think about how my father looked. I hadn't seen him look that good in years. It's almost how I remember him now. I appreciate that."

"I hope you weren't alone when-- when-" Louis gestures.

"The nurse was here," she says. "But I told her to go. There wasn't anything left for her to do."

"I'm going to go get the- the thing," he says abruptly, "to transport him-"

He does and is relieved that there's only two steps to the front door. Before he enters, he takes a deep breath. He doesn't understand. Why has she called him of all people?

Why are they alone? Why can't she just let him be in peace because other people upset the balance, upset everything? But, worst of all is that *he doesn't care* that she's upsetting everything.

Louis works in silence and she watches him as he carefully places her cousin on the gurney. Torso, then legs and then he tucks the sheet underneath him and buckles him up. They're standing there like that and he wants to say something, to say anything and he can't so he wheels out Jeffrey's body and she helps him put the body in the hearse. They stand there quietly.

"I got divorced," she says out of nowhere. He puts his hands in his pants pockets, unsure of what to say. Did she mean something by this?

"That's unfortunate," he says. She glances at him.

"I'll come by tomorrow morning," she says, "just embalm him like you normally would. Price isn't a concern."

"Will you be opting for cremation or burial?" he says. "I have some good casket-"

"Oh, Christ," she says, "stop being a funeral director for once!"

Louis is quiet again. He wants to reach out for her, whether to take her hand or speak, just to *speak*, he's not sure-

"It's not unfortunate," she says, "I hated him. I married him because my father liked him. Businessmen together. Oh, he wasn't a bad man, but he was dull. Golf and two kids and a house in the upper-class suburbs and tennis lessons in the summer for our son (who's fourteen now, by the way and refuses to see his father)-" she stops and looks at Louis.

"What are you doing tonight?" she asks.

"Embalming him," Louis says, gesturing. "My mother is still at home-"

"Do you have to do it right away?"

"I suppose not-"

"Let's go somewhere," she says, "you can call it a date if you want and you don't have to call it that if you don't want to. But I need to be around someone *interesting* for once in my life, Louis."

It's the way she says his name, with the extra hiss at the end that makes him say yes

and he doesn't know why. And she impulsively hugs him and he's OK with that and *doesn't know why*.

"I'll meet you at Joe's Diner," she says, "you know where that is- at eight. Let's go somewhere-"

"OK," he says, agreeing again, hearing his voice tremble. He turns and takes several deep breaths as she goes back into the house. He sits in his hearse and balls his fists up tightly, feeling another battle, feeling the same thing he had felt last time.

Louis looks at the house. He sees a light go off in the living room. Gabrielle must be leaving soon. He pulls out and drives home through back roads, knowing that she won't know them.

At eight, he is sitting on the stool in the embalming room. Jeffrey O'Brien is laid out on the table in front of him. Louis gets up and stands near his body, preparing to shave him with the straight razor that he's taken to using. But first he looks down and sees how they look so similar. Slight and short and brown-haired, just his mother and a few distant relatives left in the world, but most importantly-

Oh, poor Jeffrey. All alone.

Louis does not realize that he's said it out loud. After a moment, he says it again.

"It's a shame," he says to Jeffrey O'Brien. "Being alone, but it's nice, isn't it?"

But maybe it's not. All he has is a cousin left and a mother and what's that, really? And what does Louis have? His mother and Betty and the bodies.

Louis knows that in this moment, he is stuck between butchered calligraphy and the bodies behind him, not sure why or how they're so similar, but they are and they always have been and he knows that now. Somehow, in a moment of clarity, he knows that. And he knows that Gabrielle is another path of butchered calligraphy and he knows what the bodies mean. *Control*. But not of being controlled to make decisions like whether or not to take over the funeral home, a false sense of control, one that was never a decision. But this is his own control, his work, his pride, his own tight sense of knowing exactly what to do. Never being unsure.

His watch says it's just after eight. He can make it. He can call and say he'll be late and then there's uncertainty, but there's companionship that isn't just Elvis vinyls and a senile mother who depends on him for everything. Louis looks down at poor Jeffrey.

"What do you think, Jeffrey? What should I do?"

But Jeffrey O'Brien says nothing and Louis knew he wouldn't, of course, because that's why he likes the bodies.

His cell phone, across the room on his desk, begins to vibrate. It's a sharp, harsh sound on the wood. *Bzzzt-bzzzt.*

"My mother does not want to go to a nursing home," Louis says quietly, beginning to check his body for marks that need photographed. "I don't know what to do with that either."

The phone is becoming an irritant. Louis walks over and looks at it. *Gabrielle Johnson.* It's 8:15. Louis stands there for a moment, looking at his phone and at Jeffrey's body.

This is my mother's pain. Butchered calligraphy. I could leave him alone and then I couldn't.

Jeffrey O'Brien is silent.

Louis carefully picks up his cell phone, inspects the caller ID carefully. That buzzing will get irritating quickly and he'll need his concentration to make Jeffrey look good. So Louis opens the desk drawer and drops the phone in, hearing it clunk onto a pile of papers. The clang of the metal as he shoves the drawer shut rings in his ears until he begins to disinfect in between Jeffrey's toes.

"I hope she'll stop that soon," Louis says idly, scrubbing the bottoms of Jeffrey's feet.

The phone doesn't stop ringing until eight-forty-five.